

VZCZCXRO0361
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DE RUEHDS #1065/01 1080640
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0325
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEWMFD/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE IMMEDIATE
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 001065

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTIONS HERALD 8: A TALE OF TWO TURNOUTS

REF: ADDIS 1000 (AND PREVIOUS)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Ethiopia voted on April 13 in the first round of local elections. With only a handful of unknown or apparently-partisan domestic election observer organizations authorized by the National Electoral Board (NEB) and a pointed statement to diplomats and foreigners not to loiter or linger around polling stations, the world's perception of these elections is effectively limited to the Ethiopian Government's reports and spin with no ability to confirm or prove wrong allegations of malfeasance. But with so few opposition candidates able to run, the result of the election was not in doubt. Despite restrictions, Mission personnel did observe approximately 25 polling stations, as well as street dynamics, around Addis Ababa. In stark contrast to the NEB's claim of over 95 percent voter turnout, Post's first hand snapshots of round one voting suggest an abysmal turnout and overwhelming voter malaise in the capital city. Restrictions on observation preclude Post from any independent assessment of rural polling dynamics. End Summary.

ELECTION OBSERVERS: LARRY, MOE, CURLY - YES, BUT NOT CARTER

2. (SBU) After months of pressure by the diplomatic community the NEB finally released directives for how domestic organizations can request to observe elections on February 29. Two reputable organizations who took leading roles in past election observation efforts, the Organization for Social Justice in Ethiopia (OSJE) and the Action Professionals' Association for the People (APAP), chose not to even request permission to observe the elections due to a lack of confidence in the process, according to officials who informed us in private. While the NEB has declined to report how many organizations applied to observe, they did approve -- through private responses to the petitioners and without any public release -- eleven domestic organizations. While the NEB's failure to respond to the Ethiopian Human Rights Council's (EHRCO) request to observe kept this reputable organization indoors on polling day, the eleven approved organizations are overwhelmingly small, unheard-of groups or organizations known to maintain strong, close ties to the government with little or no experience in election observation. The eleven approved domestic observation organizations are:

--Union of Victims of the Derg Regime and Family Members: A

well known organization working closely with the Ethiopian Government (GoE) to support the prosecution of Derg leaders,

--Martyrs Monument Building Association: An organization which works closely with the Union of Victims of the Derg Regime which focuses on building monuments around the country to the valor of those opposed to the previous regime,

--South Ethiopia Nations and Nationalities Regional Government Legal Professional Association: A civic association active in the south with no previous election observation record,

--SNNPRS Youth Association - Addis Ababa Chapter; Amhara Region Youth Association -- Addis Ababa Chapter: These youth associations are normally supported by local governments or the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports with no previous election observation experience,

--Scholars Association for Development; Initiative for Human Development: Two newly formed organizations with no previous election observation experience or track-record otherwise,

--Addis Ababa Islamic Affairs Supreme Council: Generally perceived as working closely with the government, the Council oversees Islamic affairs in the capital and participated in observing the 2005 elections,

--Ra-iy Ethiopia Association: A small NGO engaged in women's and children's issues and HIV projects,

--Wegegta Reproductive Health and Anti-AIDS Association:

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A first time election observer group normally engaged in reproductive health and HIV/AIDS activities,

--Tinsae Ethiopia Association: A never before heard of organization.

13. (SBU) According to the Dutch Ambassador, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi informed the Dutch and Japanese Ambassadors, chair and vice chair respectively of the "Ethiopia Partners Group" of ambassadors, on March 28 that no international observers would be invited to monitor these elections and foreign diplomats would not be allowed to enter polling stations or stay in their vicinity. The Prime Minister noted that "there is no added value" for diplomats to visit polling stations, as all information on the elections, procedures, infrastructure, etc. could be obtained by talking to Ethiopian citizens.

WHAT IF THEY HOLD AN ELECTION AND NOBODY COMES?

14. (SBU) The prevailing public sentiment around Addis Ababa throughout the electoral process has been one of resignation and malaise. While the NEB had claimed to register 1.1 million voters in Addis Ababa, many on the street had detailed persuasion tactics, applied particularly against women and the poor, threatening the withholding of local government administered public services unless individuals registered to vote. Obvious voter and public turnout on election day was consistent with this. Director of the State Department's Office of East African Affairs James Knight, P/E Chief, and Political Specialist conducted a windshield tour of Addis Ababa's diverse neighborhoods to glean election day dynamics within the Prime Minister's rigid parameters. Other mission personnel conducted similar reviews.

15. (SBU) While people were out and about throughout the capital city, the numbers of vehicles on the road and the number of people going about their daily business was notably less than any average Sunday morning. Throughout

Addis, polling stations opened uniformly one hour late. Popular speculation argues that this move was an effort to allow voters' queues to grow to present a photo op of robust voter turnout. Whether or not this hypothesis is accurate, long lines were as notably absent from the capital's streets at opening time as they were throughout the day. Of the approximately 25 polling stations visited by Mission personnel, only two had notable numbers of people. In the only polling station exhibiting any sort of line, roughly twenty people -- almost all women -- were seen. Mission personnel also observed approximately 10-15 individuals at various stages of entering, exiting, and lingering at one other polling station, this in the capital city's largely-Tigrean neighborhoods. This latter polling station was the only polling station to have a mobile police unit parked outside in addition to the standard four-to-five police officers manning polling station entrances.

¶6. (SBU) Among the other polling stations visited, the only people present at ten of these were police, without any apparent civilians or voters. Among the other polling stations visited, on average only two-to-three voters were ever seen. The police presence at these polling stations ranged from three to seven. Two polling stations were so quiet that even the police manning the entrance were having their shoes polished. According to long-term Addis Ababa residents, not only was the public turnout at polling stations and on the streets dramatically lower than the strong 2005 turnout, but it was also notably less than even the more modest turnouts for the 2000 national, and 2004 local elections. Contacts at other embassies report similar findings from their reviews of election day.

GOE: TURNOUT IS ROBUST

¶7. (SBU) While the public turnout observed mirrored the notable absence of public excitement on the streets of Addis Ababa, the NEB's reports of voter turnout provided a stark contrast. Two hours before polling stations closed, the state-run Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) quoted

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the NEB Chairman Dr. Merga's report that 93 percent of the registered voters nationwide had voted. In an attempt to support these claims of high turnout, Ethiopian Television ran file footage of very long lines of anxious voters waiting outside of polling stations -- from the 2005 national elections. Upon the conclusion of voting, ENA quoted Dr. Merga's statistic that 95 percent of the 26 million registered voters had done their civic duty. The Foreign Ministry on April 14 told P/E Chief that voter turnout in Addis was likely a bit lower, estimated around 85 percent. In response to P/E Chief's mention of the absence of queues, limited numbers, and reduced level of people on the streets, MFA's Director for the Americas explained these observations away by noting that the number of polling stations had increased from previous elections, so there is little reason why people would have to wait in line, and thus, no lines to be observed.

¶8. (SBU) A cursory review of the statistics posted at polling stations after the elections suggests a far cry, at least in Addis Ababa, from the 95 percent voter turnout. With each polling station designed to accommodate approximately 1,000 voters, one would expect a total of around 950 votes cast at each polling station. In a random sample of five polling stations, however, the total number of votes cast for all candidates vying were: 60, 247, 117, 627, and 418. Assuming that these polling stations were to accommodate 1,000 voters, these levels would suggest 6, 25, 12, 63, and 42 percent voter turnout respectively. If the NEB's claimed 95 percent turnout is accurate, however, these vote totals suggest a massive

number of spoiled ballots or protest votes against the election process (a strategy that several opposition supporters had earlier pledged to invoke).

OPPOSITION DYNAMICS

¶9. (SBU) With opposition parties able to register candidates for only four-tenths of one percent of the contested seats and the largest opposition party boycotting the elections, Post expected minimal actual election day malfeasance. The largest remaining opposition party, the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), however, reported that several of its party's election observers were beaten to dissuade them from observing polling station activities. Initial polling station results suggest that despite winning large margins in the 2005 elections not a single OFDM candidate won in these same constituencies on April 13. The United Ethiopian Democratic Forces' (UEDF) Beyene Petros reported that despite having announced its boycott of the elections on April 10, UEDF intended candidates still encountered police at their houses on election day telling them not to go outside. Even the small Afar Liberation Front reported that 15 of its party's candidates and 20 party election observers were arrested on the morning of the election.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) The most dramatic source of public animosity toward the government and ruling party is focused around Addis Ababa's City Hall, where in 2005 the opposition won 137 out of 138 seats and the Mayorship. This time, between the impediments to opposition party candidate registration and the boycott of the elections which alleged intimidation tactics prompted, the ruling EPRDF looks poised to take the overwhelming majority, if not all, of the city council seats.

¶11. (SBU) Unable to directly observe election day dynamics, or even to mingle outside of polling stations, Ethiopia's resident diplomatic community's ability to assess the integrity of the April 13 elections (and coming round two, kebele level elections on April 20) is severely hampered. Nevertheless, the direct observations of election day atmospherics are equally as dissonant with the NEB and GoE's reports as have been the opposition's allegations of harassment and intimidation from the GoE's explanation of these throughout the 2008 electoral process. The challenge facing the United States and the international

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community is to convince the GoE and ruling party to ease both its iron fisted grip on political space and impediments to credible, neutral verification of the political environment to regain public confidence in the democratic process before public frustration and anger erupts into insecurity. The Ambassador and Post firmly believe that we must begin now to lay the groundwork for opening political space in advance of the 2010 national elections or face the potential violence that sustained harassment and intimidation risks spurring. Current ethnic and internal political dynamics suggest that an outbreak of political violence in Ethiopia will significantly surpass Ethiopia's post-election violence of 2005 as well as that in Kenya more recently, and place in jeopardy our national interests in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The Embassy will lay out a game-plan for how to move this forward in coming reports. End Comment.
YAMAMOTO